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### The Mental Health Awareness Group

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## **The Mental Health Awareness Group: Developing A Psycho-Educational Group for Learning Disabled Forensic In-Patients With Co-Morbid Mental Illness**

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In the State Hospital there was an existing 'Coping With Mental Illness' group for normal IQ patients, leading to the authors deciding to develop the 'Mental Health Awareness Group' there and in Lynebank (Fife region, Scotland). The major aims of the group are: to increase patients knowledge and understanding of illness; to explore any relationships between illness and offending; to encourage greater dialogue with staff about their symptoms.

A literature search had ascertained that there was little published about this type of psycho-educational work for people with learning disabilities. A group had been established at Ashworth Hospital in England for people with Schizophrenia who also had cognitive and/or educational difficulties. The Consultant at Ashworth kindly agreed to share their group materials; while these were initially used to provide structure the groups, they were felt to be too complex and not in an accessible enough format to meet the learning needs of PWLD.

The groups run for 7 weeks. All participants have Schizophrenia. Group rules are re-explained during each session and pro-social behaviours reinforced.

Most patients have demonstrated a reasonable understanding of their symptoms, the available treatments, awareness of what made them feel worse and what their 'warning signs' were for becoming ill. A number of patients have disclosed symptoms (in some cases relevant to their offending or challenging behaviours) which had not previously been documented or recognised.

The importance of recognising 'warning signs' and speaking to staff about symptoms is emphasised. The reinforcement of pro-social behaviours during groups builds upon a culture of promoting respect and tolerance for others within secure settings.

The authors have developed more appropriate learning materials for the groups. Patients receive individualised 'staying well' plans which they can go over with team members to promote the therapeutic outcomes of the group.